

Get Connected

Consumer e-News | Fall 2019

REGULATORY COMMISSION OF ALASKA | Consumer Protection & Information Section

(907) 276-6222 | 1-800-390-2782 (outside Anchorage) | 7-1-1 TTY

✉ rca.mail@alaska.gov or cp.mail@alaska.gov

🌐 www.rca.alaska.gov

Telecom Update: Senate Bill 83 Signed into Law, *effective November 27, 2019*



On August 29, 2019, Governor Mike Dunleavy signed Senate Bill 83, which repeals a number of statutes relating to telecommunications companies that provide local landline and intrastate long distance services. The new law eliminates: 1) the need for phone companies to request approval from the Regulatory Commission of Alaska (RCA) to change their rates,

terms, and conditions; 2) the need for phone companies to file annual reports; and 3) the ability for the RCA to designate a Carrier of Last Resort. The new law also requires the phone companies to offer uniform rates, terms, and conditions within the service areas in which the companies serve. The RCA will continue to have oversight on:

- **Certification requirements** (AS 42.05.221-.281). A certificated phone company may not modify or abandon a service area without RCA approval.
- **Alaska Universal Service Fund**. See changes adopted in R-18-001.
- **Telecommunications Relay Services** (3 AAC 51) for the Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and Speech Impaired.
- **Rates, terms, and conditions of inmate calls**. The Alaska Department of Corrections contracts with Securus Technologies, Inc., which holds two certificates of public convenience and necessity (certificate) issued by the RCA namely: Certificate No. 461 for the provision of intrastate interexchange service and Certificate No. 758 for the provision of local inmate calling private pay telephone services.
- **Designation of Eligible Telecommunications Carriers (ETC)**. Under 3 AAC 53.400, the RCA will continue to have an active role in determining which companies can access federal support provided for telecommunications.

Consumers who are unable to resolve their disputes with the phone companies may file an **informal complaint** to the RCA Consumer Protection & Information Section.

Thinking about buying a new cell phone or upgrading your data plan?

Tips for Consumers

Before You Purchase. Estimate how much data you'll need on a monthly basis, determine what features you want, what's included, optional services, and additional fees, taxes, and surcharges.

Read the Fine Print. Most people quickly scroll through the fine print and accept the "terms and conditions" or "terms of service" without actually reading them. Before you accept the terms and sign your name on the dotted line, carefully read the fine print – it could save you some headache down the road (and a lot of money!).

Consumer Protection & Service Quality.

According to the Alaska telecommunications regulations (3 AAC 53.450), a wireless provider that is designated as an ETC must comply with the Cellular Telecommunications and Internet Association's Consumer Code for Wireless Service by:

- (1) disclosing rates and terms of service to customers;
- (2) making available maps showing where service is generally available;
- (3) providing contract terms to customers and confirming changes in service;
- (4) allowing a trial period for new service;
- (5) providing specific disclosures in advertising;
- (6) separately identifying carrier charges from taxes on billing statements;
- (7) providing customers the right to terminate service for changes to contract terms;
- (8) providing ready access to customer service;
- (9) promptly responding to consumer inquiries and complaints received from government agencies; and
- (10) abiding by policies for protection of consumer privacy.



Numbers to Know. For help, call:

RCA Consumer Protection & Information Section (907) 276-6222

Alaska Office of the Attorney General Consumer Protection Unit (907) 269-5200

Federal Communications Commission 1-888-CALL-FCC

Power Cost Equalization Funding Restored!

Safe and reliable electric utility service in rural communities of Alaska is expensive. In the state's most remote areas such as Buckland, electricity can cost up to three times the average in Anchorage, Juneau, and Fairbanks. In the mid-80s, the Alaska Legislature established the Power Cost Equalization (PCE) program to help make electricity more affordable for rural communities.



Photo Credit: Nathan Williams

PCE is administered by two state agencies – the RCA and the Alaska Energy Authority (AEA). The RCA determines if an electric utility is eligible to participate in the program and calculates the amount of PCE per kilowatt-hour payable to the electric utility. The AEA determines eligibility of residential and community facility customers and authorizes payment to the electric utility.

In July this year, the Alaska Attorney General and the Office of Management & Budget sent letters to lawmakers confirming that several accounts, including PCE, are being swept into the Constitutional Budget Reserve. This led to a freeze on PCE disbursements.

On August 8, 2019, Governor Mike Dunleavy approved Senate Bill 2002 that included the reverse sweep and reinstating PCE funding for Fiscal Year 2020. Participating utilities and eligible customers would receive PCE credits retroactive to July.



Every 6 minutes

An underground utility line is damaged because someone decided to dig without first calling 8-1-1.

Estimating Your Energy Bills

If you live in Fairbanks and have electric service with Golden Valley Electric Association, Inc. (GVEA), you can calculate how much your total bill should be by using GVEA's [online Bill Calculator](#). Select the type of service (e.g., residential) and enter your kilowatt-hour. The [Bill Calculator](#) will calculate a total bill for the usage entered.

If you live in Anchorage and have gas service with ENSTAR Natural Gas Company, at 133 cubic feet (ccf) gas usage, your gas bill should total \$149.27 under the current approved rates.

ENSTAR Customer Charge	16.00
ENSTAR Service Charge (Base) 133 ccf @ .147590	19.63
Regulatory Cost Charge (RCC) @ .158%	0.24
	<hr/>
Supplier Gas Cost Charge (GCA) 133 ccf @ .85263	113.40
	<hr/>
Total Supplier Charges	113.40
Current Gas Charges	\$149.27

To verify the rates charged by regulated public utilities, visit the RCA website to download a utility's current effective tariff by selecting the utility's certificate number from this link: [Certificated Public Utilities](#).

Protect Yourself from Identity Theft

Frank Abagnale, a former con man who went on to become an FBI security consultant for four decades – and the basis for the movie *Catch Me If You Can* – is coming to Anchorage on September 19, 2019. With an eye on the latest cyber fraud techniques, Abagnale will share his insights on how to spot scams and how to avoid becoming a victim of identity theft. For more information and to RSVP, visit aarp.cvent.com/FAVIP2019.

To report fraud, identity theft, or an unfair business practice, visit the Federal Trade Commission's website at ftc.gov.

To learn about Alaska laws when there is a breach of security of an information system containing personal information, visit the Department of Law's [Alaska Personal Information Protection Act webpage](#).

Protect Water Pipes in Your Home Before Winter

Here are some practical ways to avoid costly repairs and service line freeze ups.



Inspect and Unclog Drains. Run water through each drain in your sinks and bathtubs. Slow drains may need to be cleaned out. You can do this by taking out the p-trap and removing any hair or debris that is trapped there. You can also unclog drains naturally: pour $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of baking soda down the drain followed by $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of white vinegar; wait a few minutes and follow this with boiling water. Pour boiling water down the drains weekly to prevent clogs.

Check for Leaks. Faucets may leak because of faulty pipes under the sink or from water deposits in the aerator. A leaky toilet may make your toilet sound like it is constantly refilling, and the leak could spill water onto your bathroom floor. Some leaks are easy to repair by cleaning or replacing your faucet aerator or your toilet's valve. You may need the help of a plumber to fix more complicated leaks.

Maintain Your Sump Pump. Many homes in Alaska have sump pumps to help drain flood water from the basement. If you have a sump pump, you should take a moment to make sure that it is in good condition before winter hits. Look inside the lid. It should be empty and water should easily flow out of the pump. Test the pump by running water through it. If it is clogged, the pipes could freeze and burst. Clean the sump pump and arrange for professional services as needed.

Service Water Heater. You know you will start to use your hot water heater more often as it gets colder, so you should invest the time to maintain it. Your water heater tank should be drained and sediment cleared at least once a year. Make sure that the dip tube is not broken and replace it if needed. If your hot water heater is more than five years old, you might use a special hot water blanket to insulate it with pipe insulation for the pipes leading from it.